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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of how to make school matter to historically disenfranchised, inner city African American youth, as well as youth from other struggling ethnic minority groups. It asserts that one way to do this is to reconceptualize approaches to the acquisition of literacy and literacy skills in teaching, engaging, and motivating African American and other ethnic minority students. The first section of the paper describes specific ways in which researchers and practitioners could re-envision the acquisition of literacy skills in terms of assessment, curriculum, and instruction by celebrating students' language and culture. The second section proposes other potentially innovative approaches to students' acquisition of literacy skills. These approaches include incorporating students' appreciation of prose and poetry by successful artists who express themselves in both the vernacular and the standard with power, effectiveness and grace, as well as celebrating (rather than repudiating) their linguistic and cultural propensities. (Contains 25 references.) (SM)

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# CELEBRATING BIDIALECTALISM: RECONCEPTUALIZING THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE ACQUISITION OF LITERACY AND LITERARY SKILLS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN AND OTHER ETHNICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

(American Association of Anthropological Linguistics Symposium on Multilingual, Multidialectal, and Multicultural Literacies: Theory, Research, Pedagogy, and Policy for the 21st century, February 24-27, 2001; St. Louis, Missouri)

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## Introduction

In the United States, we are frustrated with student achievement in our inner cities. The statistics for reading achievement continue to be abysmally low, especially for African American and other ethnically diverse students. Data from the Council of Great City Schools, an organization that tracks the reading performance of students in 55 large US urban school districts by ethnicity, show that in 1999, only 19.4% of Black students scored above the 50th percentile in Grade 4, 21.5% reached the same minimal cut-off point in Grade 8, and by the time they got to Grade 10, a mere 10.5% of Black students scored within range of the norm. For Whites on the other hand, the corresponding percentages for the same grades were much higher-- 55.5, 61.2, and 36.4 respectively. The question that emerges naturally from the preceding data display is "What can we do to improve reading performance among low-achieving African

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American students and other students at risk for failure in reading?" But this paper will take a broader, more far-reaching perspective, and attempt a preliminary analysis of the kinds of measures that schools and teachers might take to motivate African American (and other ethnically diverse) students to be more interested in and connected to school more generally. My argument is that poor performance in reading is symptomatic of a more deep-seated malaise and disinterest in school, and that if this lack of purposefulness and general anomie could be lifted, students' performance in literacy and literary skills would improve.

This paper therefore addresses the more germane question of how we can make school matter to our historically disfranchised, inner-city Black youth? Although my presentation at this symposium targets African American students, much of what I say can justifiably be applied to other struggling ethnically diverse students as well (Latinos, Pacific Islanders and so on). In keeping with the theme of this symposium, I will argue that one way to do this is to reconceptualize our approach to the acquisition of literacy and literary skills in teaching, engaging, and motivating African American and other students. The paper will be divided into two sections. In the first part, I will describe specific ways in which researchers and practitioners could re-envision the acquisition of literacy skills in terms of assessment, curriculum, and instruction by celebrating students' language and culture. In the second part, I will propose other potentially innovative approaches to students' acquisition of literary skills including their appreciation of prose and poetry, also through the process of celebrating their linguistic and cultural propensities.

Reconceptualizing the Role of Language and Culture in the Acquisition of Literacy Skills

Assessment

In the present turn-of-the-century climate of high stakes testing and teacher accountability, measures of student achievement based on standardized tests have become the rule. While these tests are an excellent way of evaluating student ability in a particular domain or content area, they could also obfuscate the kinds of skills that many non-traditional students bring to the classroom in critical foundation areas such as reading comprehension. Although the nineties emphasis on authentic assessment has faded somewhat (Valencia, Hiebert & Afflerbach 1994) in the wake of current trends, its principles can still be applied to help teachers bridge the gap between what these students know and what they need to know in order to achieve in school and on standardized tests. I'd like to report here on a literacy project I conducted in a low-achieving predominantly African American classroom located in the city of Blendwood (a pseudonym) in which the conjoined principles of authentic assessment and the celebration of students' linguistic and cultural skills resulted in renewed interest and achievement in classroom work.

The students in the middle school classroom where the study took place presented the kind of profile that is consistent with the low reading scores delineated in the introductory paragraph above. In fact in the middle-school class of twenty-five, fifty percent of the students had scored below the fiftieth perccentile in their most recent standardized reading test, including seven who had scored below the tenth percentile

(A. Rickford, 1999). Despite the fact that their community was plagued by the ravages of gang warfare, drugs, alcoholism, and other problems sadly typical of the inner-city malaise, I had encountered a dynamic and vibrant group of adolescents when I entered the community as a teacher volunteer, and determined to help redirect some of their energy towards school. With the collaboration and support of their veteran teacher, Mr. Peters, and with the growing insight, based on multiple informal interactions with these students, that their capacity to express understandings of complex situations in the real world to which they were exposed might be transferable to their interaction with texts, I designed a reading study to help bring this capacity to the fore.

Research has shown that low-income, ethnic minority students are not only fully capable of responding to high-level kinds of questions, but also tend to be indifferent to more traditional, old-style questions (Heath, 1982). Yet, as critics have observed, these students have traditionally been denied access to the kinds of questions that stimulate the intellect and raise levels of cognition because "tests, textbooks, and curricula have increasingly focused on minimal skills e.g. literal comprehension...and factual recall, rather than the skills that may lead to a higher level of thinking by African American and minority students..."(Darling-Hammond, 1985). In my investigative study therefore, I wanted to give students the opportunity to explore their intuitions and reactions to the substantive thematic issues they would encounter in reading specially selected narratives in which they had previously expressed an interest (see next section on curriculum). In the spirit of Bakhtin's principle of heteroglossia (1981), I wanted to encourage students to voice their own unique perspectives in interpreting the literature they read based on insights and understandings gleaned from their own life experiences. In short, the aim of

my study was to combine interest, motivation, and purpose in narrative reading for pleasure, deep discussion, and critical analysis and appreciation.

For purposes of analysis and design integrity, I identified four categories of comprehension questions in my study: general questions, literal meaning questions, interpretive reading-critical evaluation questions, and creative reading questions. The literal meaning questions reflected the kind of text-based specificity and informational points of detail typical of many standardized tests, while the interpretive reading-critical evaluative, and creative reading questions signified the kinds of higher-order thinking questions representative of the upper end of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956). For example, a typical lower-order literal meaning question read, "What happened one day when etc. etc.?" and required scouring the text for an answer. But a typical higher-order question read, "Was it right or wrong that etc. etc.?" or "How/ Why do you think etc. etc.? Give reasons for your answer," and required instead an interpretation of information based on an understanding and processing of the context and situation in which characters' thoughts and actions took place.

Students were urged to respond to the comprehension questions using the best (=most formal) language variety they could summon, and not to let their insecurity with standard language forms hinder their expressiveness. By the same token, when correcting and grading students' written responses to these comprehension questions, teachers were encouraged to attend primarily to the substance of the answers given, and not mark the students down for grammatical and syntactic "errors" arising from students' vernacular dialect or second language use. For example, a response that said, "It was a bad idea because he now [=know] that the cow was too heavy and picture if he fell and

the cow ran over him he would have broke his back or his ribs. That is dangerous. I wouldn't do that because I have common sense," would not be marked down because of either the student's spelling mistakes or his dramatic use of the imperative voice, or his non-standard use of the complex modal verb form. The study results were very promising.

Students scored a mean of 79% of the maximum possible points on the higher-order thinking questions—labeled interpretive reading/ critical evaluation and creative reading questions--, marking their highest mean score of all four question categories. By contrast, they scored their lowest scores on the recall or literal meaning questions, gaining 60% of the maximum possible points in this question category. These results run counter to one's intuitions, and a number of reasons have been proposed for the students' achievement differential in answering these questions (see Rickford 2002 for a complete analysis). But as one reading expert offers an explanation in which he avers that the presence of "real" questions is crucial to student engagement, since "school questions are often artificial," and much like "a game" to which "the teacher knows the right answer," whereas "the essence of real discourse is unpredictability and authenticity" (Calfee & Patrick, 1995). Further, the warning of the distinguished Brazilian educator and political activist Paolo Freire that education is meant to develop "a critical spirit and creativity, not passivity," and that one should be "concerned with stimulating and challenging" the people reinforces the significance of meaningful contextualized questions. Ultimately, one of the critical points that emerges from this study however, is that educators would stand to gain a more accurate understanding of their ethnically diverse students' cognitive capabilities if they were willing to explore innovations in their approach to the

acquisition of literacy skills, in particular their assessment of reading comprehension skills, insofar as they interface with the language and culture of their students.

Curriculum

Another way for teachers to help their struggling students develop an interest in school and remain connected with it is to increase their use of literature materials that are congruent with students' culture in shaping the curriculum. Although the ethnic and cultural composition of schools in many states have changed over the last several decades, especially in states such as California which have a significant immigrant population, teachers and curricula have not adapted sufficiently, and in some cases, administrators remain apathetic about or antagonistic to curricular change. African American students and their parents are often frustrated with literature curricula that almost entirely omit writers of color and women. In fact one manifestation of such frustration occurred in 1998 when a group of ethnically diverse parents in San Francisco banded together under school board member Steve Phillips, and proposed to the district a curriculum mandate that four out of every ten texts studied in high school literature classes should be by or about people of color. Although quotas are not the most felicitous solution to the problem, the parents' dissatisfaction with the curriculum and their call for increased cultural relevance and sensitivity were manifested.

The idea of culturally congruent literature (Ladson-Billings 1995) holds that teachers should make conscious decisions to select for reading and language arts study, literature in which their students could see themselves reflected positively, and strive to use images and metaphors that debunk the myth of ethnic minority inferiority. It urges

instead that teachers project positive images of diverse ethnicities to motivate and energize their pupils. The principle of cultural congruence has conceptual counterparts in the idea of "culture-centered learning" (King, 1995), and "socio-culturally relevant text selection" (A. Rickford, 1999).

Features of culturally congruent literature include both deep-structure and surface-structure elements. Deep-structure elements refer to texts containing themes, issues, characters, situations, and perspectives with which students can identify. Texts are authentic, interesting, motivational, and purposeful. Surface-structure elements refer to the presence in texts of linguistic features such as dialect usage and ethnic illustrations that capture students' interest, and enhance their feelings of dignity and self-worth. The advantage of culturally congruent literature is that it stimulates deep emotional and cognitive involvement among ethnically diverse students, while benefiting all students regardless of ethnic background. At the same time, it is important to note that cultural congruence does not exclude works from the traditional literary canon, which should always be valued and taught, and related to students' experiences, conflicts, and aspirations where possible.

The Blendwood study is a case in point for the adoption of culturally congruent literature in all schools, but especially in those that house students of diversity. A significant component of the study was the inclusion of culturally congruent literature in the form of African American folktales and ethno-cultural narratives. These texts contained both the elements of deep- and surface-structure described above. When asked to rate the extent to which they liked and enjoyed these texts using a Likert scale of 1-5, the students gave each of the six texts a high rank ranging from 4.6 to 4.9. In addition,

when asked to comment specifically on the fact that many of the stories contained evidence of dialect usage (African American Vernacular English, students' responses were unanimously celebratory. They said that the dialect "makes the story more interesting," "puts excitement in it," and urged that "people have to hear there [=their] own way of talking." Another response was that "the dialect puts a lot of feelings in it." Finally, one student's remark was eloquent not only in and of itself, but also for its socio-political thrust: "I like it because it gives people who aren't that culture and know nothing about it a chance to see how other people are." Students claimed therefore that the culturally congruent text selections were effective because they were motivational, inspirational, engaging, and emotionally rewarding. The study shows that the curriculum and its manifestation in the text do matter, although "in non-stereotypical fashion," (Calfee, 1998), and that celebrating bidialectalism in the literacy and content area in teaching African American students is indeed a promising pursuit.

Related to the idea of culturally sensitive curriculum materials, are investigations into the effect of culture-based teaching pedagogy in designing teaching and learning activities and interactions, and in this regard, research-based interventions have also yielded positive outcomes. For instance, in teaching Hawaiian children to read, Au and Mason reported success in applying elements of the Hawaiian culture-base of social organization in classrooms where traditional methods had failed (Au & Mason, 1981). Further, Ball found that African American adolescents showed preference for certain organizational structures in their oral and written expositions which were culturally related (Ball, 1991). In addition, Foster documented ways in which a teacher successfully used the Black culture-based language of control and critique to communicate curriculum

(Foster, 1995) in a model consonant with my own account of her classroom observations of an African American teacher's culture-based curriculum and pedagogy (A. Rickford, 1999). These research studies all border on the boundary between curriculum and instruction; the latter component will be explored more thoroughly in the next section of the paper.

Instruction

Insofar as approaches to instruction impact the acquisition of literacy skills among African American students who speak black dialect, the recommendation I wish to make is consonant with the pervading theme of this paper, namely that pedagogical techniques that celebrate rather than alienate students are far more effective in the domain of learning and teaching. Indeed, there are many organizations that endorse the right of students who speak a dialect to use it. These groups include the Committee on College Composition and Grammar (CCCC), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA), and the International Reading Association (IRA). The 1996 NCTE/ IRA Standards affirm that when bidialectalism is valued, "students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles" (p. 3). Yet there is ample evidence that many teachers, ignorant or disrespectful of their students' practical, emotional, and psychological attachment to their dialect, aim to stamp it out of existence.

In my sixteen years of experience as a teacher and teacher educator, I have garnered an abundance of anecdotal evidence of the dire and stultifying effects of this

practice on students' psyche and on their ability to engage in one of the fundamentals of literacy—writing. I recently spoke with the mother of a ten year old "mainstream" girl, who said that she was dismayed to learn that her daughter's pervading impression of herself was that of an incapable writer whereas she had found her writing assignments quite sophisticated in their tone, topic, artistry, and completeness. But because of grammatical mistakes, her scripts had been routinely marked down, and the preponderance of red markings had caused her student to disparage her own writing, and more regrettably, had undermined her self-esteem with respect to language arts. In addition to this example, I have personally encountered multiple cases during my ten years of visiting K through 12 schools to observe reading teacher practitioners, where the obsession with syntax and grammar have blinded teachers to the literary potential and creative prowess of their students. This is not to belittle the significance of these elements, which could be improved over time with coaching that was regular, systematic and clear (Rickford 2001). This is rather to urge that teachers endeavor to nurture the creative potential of their students, free from the stultifying shackles of a perfect grammar, perfect prosody model of writing.

Besides anecdotes however, there is research evidence that show that approaches that take into account the systematic and rule-governed nature of the vernacular explained and affirmed by many linguists (see Labov 1970) in bridging the grammatical and syntactic gap between Standard English (SE) and AAVE are more successful in helping students learn to read and write than those that persist with a program to eradicate students' vernacular dialect. In general, linguists proclaim the advantages of "contrastive analysis" approaches with its emphases on discrimination between AAVE and SE,

identification of AAVE and SE features, translation between the two varieties, and carefully organized and informed response drills over the more traditional dialect eradication or "drill and kill" worksheet-based approaches. As one linguist contends: "This method allows for increased efficiency in the classroom, as teachers can concentrate on the systematic areas of contrast with SE that cause difficulty for vernacular speakers, rather than taking on the more daunting task of teaching all of English grammar." (Rickford, 1999:13).

Among the research studies that validate this claim are a fifth and sixth grade literacy program conducted by Harris-Wright in De Kalb County, Georgia, and an Academic English Mastery Program under the directorship of Le Moine in the Los Angeles Unified School district. In an experimental condition in Georgia, fifth and sixth grade students who spoke predominantly African American Vernacular English, were taught English by particular comparison between their vernacular and the standard, while control groups were denied explicit comparison. Results showed that in the three years between 1995 and 1997, students in the bidialectal group made bigger reading gains every year than students in the control group who actually showed minor losses. For example, bidialectal students showed gains of 2.68, 2.68, and 3.89 in reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, while control group students showed a loss of .37, a gain of 2.0, and a loss of .05 in the three successive years (Harris-Wright, 1999; Rickford, 2001). Similarly in Los Angeles, students in the experimental writing group showed a gain of 2.5 points on the 1999 SAT-9 test, while students in the control group gained only 1.68 points, while similar results held for the reading and language arts components of the test (Maddahian & Sandamela, 2000).

But research that demonstrates both the positive effects of dialect celebration and the potentially negative effects of dialect diminution is Piestrup's 1973 study of six teaching styles used by teachers of dialect speaking African American children in Oakland public schools in California. In this study, Piestrup observed African American AAVE speakers being taught to read by teachers using what she identified as six different teaching styles: the Vocabulary Approach, the Decoding Approach, the Standard Pronunciation Approach, the White Liberal Approach, the Black Artful Approach, and the Interrupting Approach. Using the Black Artful Approach as a proxy for the celebration of black dialect (in which condition students are given the opportunity to read strings of phrases and sentences without interruption and using dialectal intrusions), and the Interrupting Approach as the proxy for the diminution of black dialect (in which students are constantly stopped as they read and their grammatical errors corrected), the study outcomes are quite telling as to which approach is to be advocated.

The children who received the highest reading scores were the ones whose teachers used the Black Artful Approach, an approach which valued the home language or dialect of the students, while guiding them towards the use of the standard variety or school language. Although these had students used the highest amount of dialect (up to approximately 40% ) in their speech at the start of the experiment, their reading scores almost equaled those of students whose teachers used the Interrupting Approach, (an approach whereby children were constantly interrupted as they read and their non-standard syntax and grammar corrected), despite the fact that at the start of the

experiment, these children had used the least amount of dialect (about a mere 4%) in their speech.

Although the contrastive analysis approach to helping AAVE speakers acquire the use of Standard English in their reading and writing is perhaps the most well-established and the most pedagogically sound, there have been other attempts to help Black students acquire literacy. Dialect readers—reading texts written in AAVE and intended to be used as a first step before transitioning students to Standard English texts—have been suggested and tried also with positive outcomes (see Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981 and Rickford & Rickford, 1995). More recently, the Urban Minorities Reading Project, a project funded by the US Dept. of Education and directed by Labov and Baker at the University of Pennsylvania, has conducted a reading error analysis identifying the kinds of decoding errors that black students (and other poor readers) make, and the frequency of these errors with a view to eliminating mistakes in decoding texts written in Standard English (Labov & Baker, 2000).

## Reconceptualizing the Role of Language and Culture in the Acquisition of Literary Skills

### Incorporating the Gifts of Prose and Poetry

It was the great Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, who helped sensitize the Western intellectual community to the importance of education as cultural action. He upheld the belief that education is meant to develop "a critical spirit and creativity, not passivity" (Freire, 1970). He believed further that as teachers, we should be "concerned

with stimulating and challenging" students, and not merely with "delivering or transferring to the people...rigorous explanations of the facts to be digested" (op. cit.). These admonitions discourage the same kind of diluted dose of education discussed earlier in this paper with respect to literacy practices in the African American and other ethnically diverse communities. I wish to argue in this second part of the paper (in much the same vein as I did in the first), that a positivistic approach to the bidialectal skills that black (and other minority) students bring to the educational playing field, can also be harvested and used as cultural capital for their learning and acquisition of literary skills.

In critiquing approaches to literature found in schools, Rosenblatt (1981) considers the importance of a balance between "efferent" and "aesthetic" readings of texts. Efferent readings emphasize the factual aspects of the work, such as authorial information and other details, whereas aesthetic readings are more concerned with the workings of the imagination through the literary devices such as image, metaphor, and language which the author employs to convey his or her message. Regrettably, many African American students who are AAVE speakers rarely have the opportunity to indulge in, embrace, learn and grow from the aesthetics of literary works because such "high-brow" study of literary materials is usually reserved, not for the "skills" classes in which many of them are enrolled, but for upper level English classes which are largely populated by mainstream Standard English speakers.

However, this need not be the case if students' bidialectalism is affirmed, and pride in their diversity and dialect ability are celebrated by studying the prose, poetry, and literary accomplishments of successful artists who express themselves in both the vernacular and the standard with power, effectiveness, and grace. Again, I offer this

proposal not to eschew the studying of great literature in the traditional "canon," but rather as a bridge to it, and also for the inherent value and motivational power of the literary works to which I refer. Teachers could use the illustrious collection of black literature and song, both poetry and prose, short stories and novels, replete with its potent message and meter, line and verse, cadence and stanza to attract students to literary analysis and literary appreciation. They could also use original linguistic samples from writers to teach about language variation, and to train students to extend their versatility in both directions—from the vernacular to the standard and from the standard to the vernacular, as well as with different genres.

Bidialectalism has been conceptualized heretofore in a very effete, unidimensional manner with the emphasis on the acquisition of Standard English. But an innovative approach could have students translating from dialect to Standard English as well as from Standard English to AAVE. Indeed this model reflects some of the struggles that many writers encounter, aligns the day-to-day linguistic challenges that AAVE speakers face with those of some of our literary giants, and provides accessible models for them to embrace and emulate. Some of the literary luminaries who have used both AAVE and Standard English in their work are James Weldon Johnson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Claude Brown, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Like many in her artistic circle, Sanchez strongly espouses the use of the vernacular in writing. She explains that she and many other black poets decided "to tell the truth in poetry by using the language, dialect, idioms of the folks..." Similarly, it was

Claude Brown, renowned author of "Manchild in the Promised Land" who declared that AAVE "possesses a pronounce lyrical quality ... and driving rhythm", while Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison affirmed that "the worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language {AAVE}.....I know the Standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca." (op. cit.). Ironically, very few black students who struggle with the educational barriers that their vernacular dialect create, are even aware of any of the countervailing praise with which these artists enshrine it. I believe they should.

They should also know that the same Langston Hughes who wrote "Well, son, I'll tell you: / Life for me ain't been no crystal stair" in the poem "Mother to Son" also wrote, "To fling my arms wide/ In some place of the sun/ To whirl and to dance/ Till the white day is done" in the poem "Dream Variations." They should know that it was the same Gwendolyn Brooks who wrote "We real cool. We/ Left school. We/ Lurk late. We/ Strike straight" in "We real cool", who also wrote "He was born in Alabama./ He was bred in Illinois./ He was nothing but a /Plain Black boy." in "Of De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery." They should know that Alice Walker wrote her novel "The Color Purple" almost entirely in dialect while Maya Angelou wrote "I know for whom the caged bird sings almost entirely in Standard English.

It would also be instructive and a boost to their sense of self for students of bidialectalism to know that there is a long tradition of celebrating bidialectalism in other "mainstream" cultures around the world. For example the British poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) became well known for championing the Scottish vernacular and making that language an acceptable vehicle for producing world class literature. And there is

also a long line of West Indian poets (Dennis Scott, John Agard, Derek Walcott and Marilyn Agard to name a few) and writers who have espoused the Caribbean creole dialect using it extensively in their own literary creations. Students become tremendously interested and excited when they see texts written in their own vernacular dialect, and observe its elegance and effectiveness. Researchers like Lee (1993) realized this when she drew on the vernacular strategies that African American students use in creating the text of their ritual verbal exchanges, in teaching them strategies for comprehension. For example, she used the cultural word-play game of signifying as a scaffold for literary interpretation in teaching her students English Literature.

Poems and prose, novels, songs, and short stories are highly structured and highly variable forms full of power, beauty, and grace. Teachers could use literature written in both dialect and Standard English to integrate these two linguistic registers into the students' reading and language arts curriculum. Students could conceivably be taught to differentiate between the presence or absence of word-final consonant clusters, to recognize multiple negation or negative concord, to understand the use of invariant "be" to express habitual aspect, and the use of "done" to emphasize the completed nature of an action—all elements of African American Vernacular phonology, grammar, and syntax. If we could help teachers achieve this goal in the context of a celebration rather than a repudiation of their students' bidialectalism, then we would be a little closer to realizing the potential role of language in the acquisition of literacy and literary skills among African American and other ethnically diverse students.

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